

Hobos Part of Fairbury Life in the Great Depression

By: Dale C. Maley
For: FairburyNews.net
Date: January 20, 2025

Webster's dictionary defines a hobo as a very poor person who has no permanent residence and travels from place to place, especially by furtively hopping trains. Almost as soon as railroads were introduced in America, people started to get free rides by riding on train cars. After the Civil War, many soldiers returned home by jumping onto a freight train instead of walking all the way.

Wikipedia states that a hobo travels and is willing to work. A tramp travels but avoids work if possible. A bum neither travels nor works.

Hobos traveled on Illinois railroads in the early 1900s. Railroads often employed people to remove the hobos from their yards.

The Great Depression began when the U.S. stock market collapsed on "Black Thursday," October 24, 1929. Millions of people were thrown out of work, and the unemployment rate reached 25 percent. This economic downturn lasted about a decade and did not really end until Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. This Japanese attack marked the start of America's involvement in World War II.

Many men during the Great Depression were unemployed and decided to become hobos, riding the trains to distant towns to look for temporary work. Hobos often traveled through Fairbury in the 1930s.

Early steam locomotives needed to stop and replenish their water every seven to ten miles. The TP&W built a refueling station just west of where the railroad crosses Indian Creek on the east end of Locust Street. The railroad installed a dam on Indian Creek to retain water for the steam locomotives. The refueling station had a water tank and either wood or coal to operate the locomotives. This refueling station no longer exists, but at least one old photograph documents the station's design.

Refueling stations along railroads were popular points for hobos to spend the night. Descendants of one family who lived on the east end of Locust Street have a family lore story that local Fairbury residents called the area around the Indian Creek and Locust Street intersection Hobo Island. No supporting documentation about Hobo Island could be found in the Blade archives. It would not be surprising to discover that this story is true since hobos often congregated around railroad refueling stations.

In the early 1900s, Fairbury area farmers drove their livestock to a TP&W livestock loading station on the south side of Locust Street between Sixth and Seventh Streets. The loading station was a wooden structure elevated above ground level so the livestock

could be driven directly into the railroad cars. This loading station is shown on the 1924 Sanborn map of Fairbury.

Eventually, farmers began sending their livestock to market using trucks instead of railroads. In May 1936, the TP&W Railroad sent out a work crew to significantly reduce the size of the livestock loading area since it was rarely used. The Blade published a story with the heading "Break up Hobos' Paradise." The railroad workers discovered the hobos had built a retreat under the livestock loading ramps, which had been there for several years.

The Blade recounted that this hotel for weary travelers was located under the cattle sheds. While it did not have hardwood floors, electric lights, or running water, it was very comfortably equipped for their sojourns in Fairbury, and with the exception of extreme cold, they found it most inviting.

When the TP&W workers arrived to tear down the old cattle sheds, they found seven weary brethren enjoying their morning meal. When one of these hobos inquired about what was taking place, the foreman of the TP&W crew informed them that Mr. McNear, president of the railroad, was not satisfied with their living quarters and was going to build them a new hotel.

While the workmen were tearing down the shed, the "knights of the road" continued with their morning repast and did not move until some of the boards started to rattle on their table.

In September of 1933, the Blade published a story with the heading "Dog Joins Up with Tramp Befriender." That week, a hobo was arrested and spent the night in the Fairbury jail. The two metal jail cells are still located in the southwest corner of Old City Hall.

When the hobo got out of jail, he noticed that someone had cruelly tied a tin can using a rope to a dog's tail. The poor dog ran down Main Street and yelped with pain and fright. After some persuasion, the hobo convinced the dog that he was trying to befriend him, and he allowed the hobo to remove the rope and tin can from the dog.

A couple of hours after the hobo rescued the dog, the hobo and the dog were observed trudging along Route 24, a mile east of Fairbury. The dog had become the hobo's pal and was apparently enjoying the company of his new master.

In July of 1973, Perry Burroughs, a Fairbury resident, retired from a career on the TP&W Railroad. Perry was interviewed by the Blade, and an extensive article was published about his retirement.

In his retirement story, Perry recounted that besides the old telegraph key, another thing that disappeared from railroading was hobos. Perry said, "We just don't see them on trains anymore. But gosh, during the 1930s, sometimes there would be 20 or 30 of them

hop off a train when it came into town, especially at the junctions I worked, like El Paso and Sheldon."

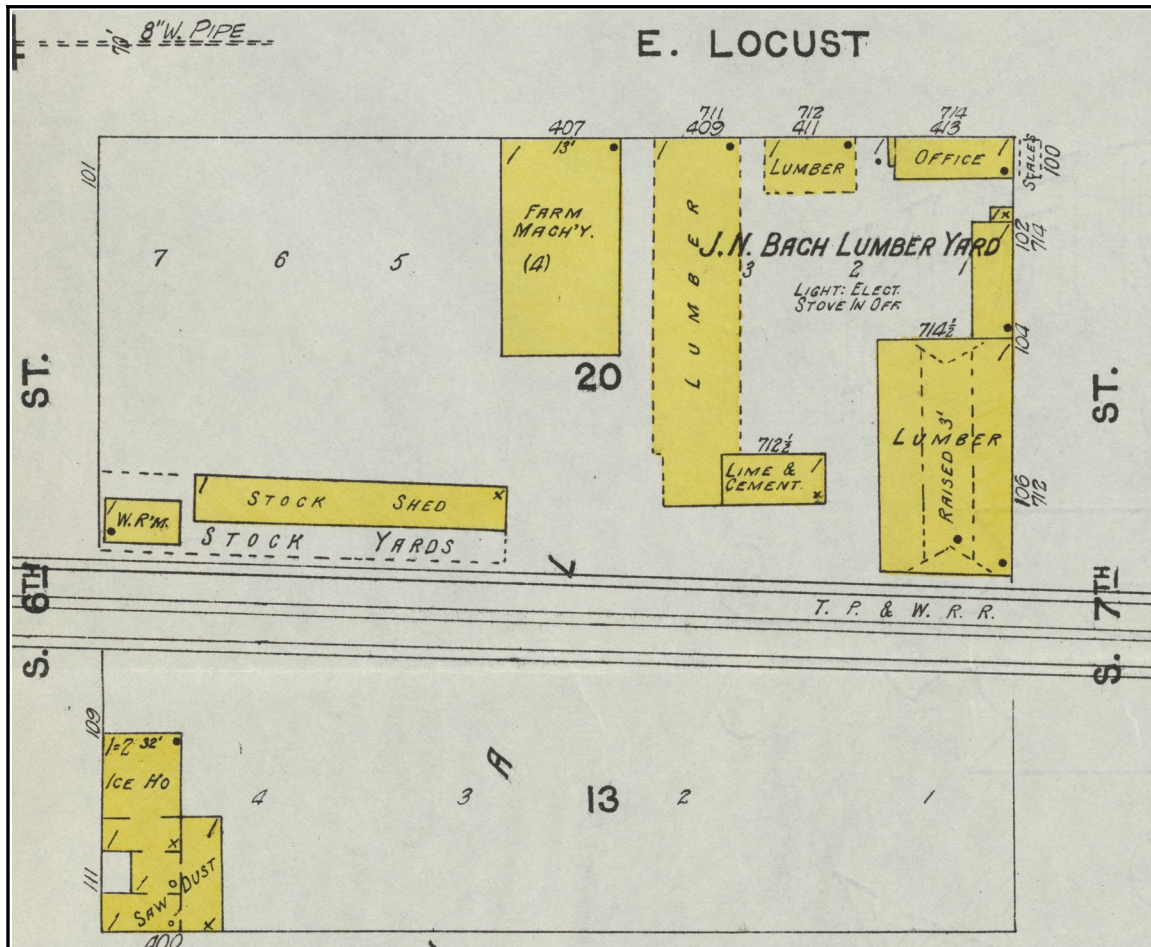
"They didn't board and unload right in front of the depot, but you could see them back aways, where they figured the freights might be slowing down. The hobos often congregated where trains had to take on water and coal."

Perry recalled that the edge of most towns had a hobo "jungle" along the tracks at one end of the town or other. Here, the Knights of the Road, as they were sometimes romantically referred to, would also assemble various donations of potatoes, meat, and vegetables they might collect or buy with nickels and dimes they panhandled and brew a pot of Mulligan stew over a campfire in those Great Depression days.

The Blade article noted that for the present-day record, it might be well to note that while "Knights of the Road" was a romantic reference, there was hardly anything romantic about riding in the dust kicked up by a freight train.

"The saddest sight I ever saw," Perry mused, "was a man, a woman, and a child about two years old riding a box car."

When World War II began, jobs were plentiful in factories making war supplies. After the war, diesel locomotives replaced the steam locomotives. The diesel locomotives required no refueling stops and traveled much faster than the old steam locomotive trains. These changes prompted the end of the major Hobo period in America.



1924 Sanborn map of Fairbury showing the livestock loading station on the north side of the railroad tracks between 6th and 7th Streets. During the Great Depression, hobos built a hotel under the livestock loading structure. The "Hobo Hotel" was removed by the TP&W railroad in 1936.



A 1930s era photograph of the TP&W refueling station that was located just west of the Locust Street bridge over Indian Creek. This photo was published in the April 18, 1974 Blade newspaper and was provided by former TP&W worker Leo R. Clark. Because freight trains had to stop at this station, it is likely that hobos boarded and got off TP&W freight trains passing through Fairbury during the Great Depression of the 1930s.